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**The Privileged and Useful Migrant:  
An Evaluation of Changing Policy  
and Scholarly Approaches Towards  
High-skilled Migration**

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# **The Privileged and Useful Migrant: An Evaluation of Changing Policy and Scholarly Approaches Towards High-skilled Migration**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the position of high-skilled migration within the contemporary migration debate in relation to the wider issue of who and what constitutes skilled migration. The paper reviews policy and scholarly approaches towards high-skilled migration within three main strands of research literature: immigration policy analysis, research on migration-development nexus and studies on integration/incorporation in receiving countries. Drawing on the interpretation of trends in these three research strands, this paper presents high-skilled migration as a necessary part of economic competitiveness, as self-help development from below and as a prototype of social mobility. In this sense, highly skilled migrants are portrayed as those who: a) are economically useful and contribute to economic competitiveness; b) benefit development outcomes in their countries of origin; and c) are easily integrated in labor markets and societies at large. As autonomous and economically independent, skilled migrants have privileged treatment and are counted on to boost economies of host societies and of their countries of origin, without posing any issues with their presence. This paper shows how policy and scholarly approaches towards highly skilled migrants determine who will be included in this privileged position. It exposes the not-so-clear-cut distinction between low- and high-skilled migration and furthers our understanding of the extent to which changing government priorities and ideologies impact international mobility by providing opportunities to move and stay for some, while erecting barriers for others.

## Keywords

Skilled international migration, immigration policies, migration-development nexus, integration, migrant categories

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## **Contents**

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Government approaches to high-skilled migration</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Skills within the migration and development debate</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Skills within the integration debate</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusion, or what is high-skilled migration after all?</b>	<b>12</b>
	<b>References</b>	<b>15</b>

# 1 Introduction

Much has been written about migration of highly skilled people, both in academic as well as in policy domain (Boeri Tito, Brücker, Docquier Frédéric, & Rapoport, 2012; Favell, Adrian, Feldblum, Miriam, & Smith, Michael Peter, 2006; Triadafilopoulos, 2013). One reason for this is that researchers and policy-makers increasingly see migrants from the perspective of their potential benefits for the host societies as well as for their home countries. Various government agencies, economic policy institutes and organizations speak of labour markets of diversity and of the need to take advantage of migrant skills. As a response to higher demand for technical skills and to globalization of production and trade, many countries openly encourage skilled immigration while at the same time trying to curtail immigration of low-skilled labour force (Cerna, 2009; Tannock, 2011). Such reasoning leads to exclusionary treatment of people on the basis of their skills. Likewise, migrants are increasingly seen as significant players in redistributive activities globally and are counted on for the long-term development benefits through the flow of ideas and business networks (Kapur, Devesh & McHale, John, 2005; Meyer, Jean Baptiste, 2001). Most salience within the development prospect has been given to financial remittances, but skilled migrants are also counted on for circulation of knowledge, for linking home countries to international social networks, and to act as transnational entrepreneurs.

This paper draws upon evidence from three research projects on skilled migration<sup>1</sup> and sets it in the context of contemporary literature on high-skilled migration. It provides insights on some of the most commonly discussed topics: first, we look at government approaches towards skilled migration; second, we address the link between migration and development; and third, we deal with integration and the role skills plays in shaping the incorporation of immigrants. In conclusion, we touch upon the issue which is not commonly discussed, even though it should be the starting point for any research within this field: what is high-skilled migration after all? Questions of who and what constitutes skilled migration are only starting to emerge in the scientific literature (Boucher, Anna & Cerna, Lucie, 2014; Favell, Adrian et al., 2006; Parsons, Rojon, Samanani, & Wettach, 2014). We present alternative stances to conceptualize high-skilled migration.

## 2 Government approaches to high-skilled migration

Skilled migration is nowadays considered an entangling part of globalization process and different interest groups try to benefit from it. Countries with knowledge-based economies design their migration policies in a way to send positive signals to the global market of mobile talent (European Commission, 2007; Tani, 2014). At the same time, countries of origin also try to benefit from their skilled abroad and see them as a resource of knowledge, skills and financial capital to boost national development.

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<sup>1</sup> The author of the paper worked as a principal researcher in the following research projects:

- 1) Highly-skilled Migration and New Destination Countries: How Government Policies Shape Destination Choices, PhD project at Maastricht University
- 2) Migration, Scientific Diasporas and Development: Impact of Skilled Return Migration on Development in India, funded by the Swiss Network For International Studies (SNIS)
- 3) The Mobility of the Highly Skilled Towards Switzerland, as part of the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) project „On the Move“, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation



Even before nation states entered the so-called “war for talent” (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001) or “global battle for brains” (Shachar, 2006), cities, companies, research and educational institutions were trying to create attractive conditions and promote themselves to the targeted group. Governments mainly got involved at the insistence of companies with a high stake in this issue. Increasing complaints of companies, especially in high technology sectors, about the shortage of adequately skilled workers led many developed countries to take new initiatives to admit more skilled labor migrants (Rothgang & Schmidt, 2003). For example, in the Netherlands, pressure from Dutch companies resulted in the accelerated entrance procedure for highly skilled foreign workers, entering in force in 2004. The specialized “knowledge migrant scheme” in the Netherlands with its minimum income requirement clearly expresses a commonly accepted point of view, where the role of the receiving country is in defining and facilitating the entry of highly skilled immigrants whose skills are considered to be attractive on national economic grounds.

Liberalized labor migration policies are politically strongly framed around the goal of economic interests and competitiveness (Menz, 2016). Policies are influenced and at the same time legitimized by the benefits to the labor market and public finance conditions in a given country. Skilled migrants are viewed to be better suited to the labor markets needs and also less welfare dependent than low-skilled migrants (Boucher, Anna & Cerna, Lucie, 2014). Besides addressing immediate shortages in the labor market, immigration policies may also pursue longer-term economic objectives, such as balancing demographic development or stimulating innovation. Germany is a clear example of invoking demographic changes in immigration discussions (Ette, Hess, & Sauer, 2016). Keeping the working-age population at a constant size is also pursued by point-based systems which favor younger immigrants. By establishing lists of occupations with a shortage of highly skilled workers, and by giving people within these occupations favorable treatment, immigration policies also go beyond filling current labor gaps and aim to expand the talent pool for long-term economic growth (Freeman 2005). For instance, in the United States there are favorable conditions for graduates in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) to stay in the country after completing their degrees. Similarly, Germany assigns foreigners with STEM degrees their own residence category.

Legitimizing immigration policies by using economic interests of the state is especially reasonable in the face of generally unsupportive public opinion of immigration and in the face of political restrictiveness (Menz, 2016). Even immigration restrictionists are usually in favor of giving preference to admitting highly skilled migrants. This has also been the case with the current proposal for immigration reform in the United States, the so-called RAISE Act. It proposed to use a “merit-based” points system, with only „the most highly educated, most English fluent, highest-paid STEM workers making the cut” (Gelatt, 2017). The growing emphasis on qualifications when selecting who can immigrate has to be seen in the context of state authorities asserting their sovereign right to control their borders. Regional agreements that expand areas of free movement (such as the Schengen agreement) and international obligations that protect migrants’ rights limit the leeway for labor migration policies (OECD, 2014). The discourse of bringing in migrants which are “economically useful and easily integrated into the labor market” (Menz, 2016) reinforces the impression that the states take care of their people’s economic interests (Lavenex, 2007). Oftentimes this form of admission is given important attention despite its contested effectiveness (Czaika & Parsons, 2015) and the fact that it encompasses a small minority of the total immigrants (Hercog & Sandoz, Forthcoming), showing how immigration is a highly politicized policy domain

with symbolic objectives far beyond only satisfying economic requirements (Triadafilopoulos, 2013).

In parallel, a growing number of studies have stressed the role of skilled migration in generating benefits for countries of origin (De Haas, 2005; Nyberg Sørensen, Van Hear, & Engberg-Pedersen, 2002). Circular migration became a buzzword (GCIM, 2005; GFMD, 2007) and policies are now directed at facilitation of brain circulation by encouraging mobility of professionals as well as supporting different kinds of transnational networks for making use of the knowledge, skills, and capital that diasporas have acquired abroad (Hercog & Siegel, 2015). Turning away from policies which intended to restrict international mobility and avert brain drain (such as quotas on the admission of skilled workers or return-migration obligations on visas) (Clemens, 2015), the focus is currently on policies which try to maximize the benefits to all sides. This perspective led to a changed approach from immigration officials in receiving countries and mainly to a reconsideration of policy options on the side of migrant-sending countries.

### **3 Skills within the migration and development debate**

The current positive outlook on the benefits of high-skilled migration was not always the norm. Much has been discussed in academic and non-academic circles about the effects on countries of origin and on those left behind, swinging back and forth from positive assessments in the post WW2 period to pessimism starting with the Oil crisis and again to current optimistic approach, which sees migrants' knowledge and skills placed partially at the service of their home countries (Castles, De Haas, & Miller, 2014; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, D., 2011).

Skilled emigration is commonly referred to as „brain drain“, the terms first used to denounce emigration of British scientists to North America in 1960s (Winters, 2009). The early literature on brain drain (Grubel & Scott, 1966; Johnson, 1967) concluded that the welfare levels of those left behind would decrease if the migrants' contribution to the economy was greater than their marginal product. Since this seems to be the case when the social return to education exceeds its private return, and given that education is often at least partly publicly financed, it was widely recognized that the brain drain was detrimental to the migrants' source countries (Beine, Docquier, & Rapoport, 2003). This view, developed notably by Jagdish Bhagwati and his coauthors in the early 1970s (Bhagwati, 1976; Bhagwati & Wilson, 1989) submits that: i) the brain drain is basically a negative externality imposed on those left behind; ii) it amounts to a zero-sum game, with the rich countries getting richer and the poor countries getting poorer; and, iii) at a policy level, the international community should implement a mechanism whereby international transfers could compensate the sending countries for the losses incurred as a result of the brain drain; for example, through an income “tax on brains” (also coined the “Bhagwati tax”) to be redistributed internationally. Not only that migration is argued to have negative effects, but migration pessimists saw it as one of the detrimental causes of underdevelopment of sending countries (Castles et al., 2014). With the emergence of new growth theories and the strong emphasis on human capital as a source of growth (Lucas, 1988), there has been a renewed interest in the study of the growth effects of the brain drain. The general view of the problem is that it would imply a significant economic and social loss if the best educated people made their contributions in a country different than their own. Building on this idea, the first models to address the issue of the brain drain in an endogenous growth framework all emphasized its negative effects (Haque & Kim, 1995; Kanbur & Rapoport, 2005).

The effects do not remain only at the economic level, but international skilled migration affects sending countries also in terms of their capacities to build domestic institutions. Kapur and McHale (2005) write about the impacts emigration might have on a country's institutional development through the decreased supply of possible institution builders as well as on the demand for better institutions.

By contrast to the migration pessimists, the new brain-drain literature suggests that allowing migration of the highly-skilled from a developing country may actually increase the incentive to acquire education. Since not all people that have been encouraged to take up education due to emigration possibility actually leave the country, the stock of skilled workers will increase (Stark, Helmenstein, & Prskawetz, 1998). This incentive effect (or brain gain) together with the positive feedback effects such as knowledge transfer and return migration after additional skills have been acquired abroad, have been put forward in the new body of literature on international skilled migration. In addition, emigration could also affect institutional development in positive ways through diaspora resources to help with building modern institutions or through returnees' valuable skills and social connections (Li, McHale, & Zhou, 2016). Macro studies on the link between emigration and governance quality of institutions generally find positive effects if migrants' destination countries are democratic (Spilimbergo, 2009), with the positive effect being especially pronounced for skilled migration (Beine & Sekkat, 2013). For example, African leaders with foreign education were shown to govern more democratically (Mercier, 2013). Quite on the contrary to discussions on brain drain, restricting skilled migration could directly harm sending countries and especially migrants (Clemens, 2016).

In terms of policy options, promoting connections with the diaspora has become the preferred tool and an alternative to seeing people who are physically elsewhere as lost and only their return would benefit the country of origin. International fora, such as the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM), Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and countries of origin encourage interconnections with host countries, through which migrants could transfer knowledge, social and financial capital (Meyer, Jean Baptiste, 2001; Tejada & Bhattacharya, 2014). Some host countries enable favorable possibilities for permanent stay to the highly skilled not only in the name of attractiveness but also in the name of offering best capacities for migrants to contribute to development in their countries. The assumption here is that migrants are more likely to visit their countries of origin to set up businesses, monitor their subsidiaries, or engage in any other way when they have a secure residency status in destination countries (Hercog & Siegel, 2015). Offering dual citizenships is a further, though more controversial, policy option of empowering migrants (Spiro, 1997; Waldrach, 2006). Bilateral agreements on the recognition of foreign qualifications and transferability of social security rights are also meant to remove the disincentives for return (Agunias & Newland, 2007). In general, it is claimed that instead of imposing obligations and directing flows, removing the obstacles has a better effect on promoting circularity (Newland, Agunias, & Terrazas, 2008).

However, worries about depleting developing countries of the scarce human capital are remaining. There are winners as well as losers among the sending countries (Beine et al., 2003). Small developing countries lack the mass for agglomeration and other scale effects to exploit talented labour efficiently, which makes them particularly prone to high rates of skilled emigration (Commander, Kangasniemi, & Winters, 2004). Developing countries' circumstances clearly



determine whether brain drain turns out as a curse or a boon. The country's size, quality of education, rate of skilled emigration, success of development policies, possibilities for agglomerations and other factors matter for the link between migration and development of a country. We should therefore refrain from overly optimistic views on what individual migrants can do for their origin countries, especially when faced with structural constraints (De Haas, 2010). The development potential is associated with the possibilities offered by the host-country environment and with the structural settings of migrants' home countries. It is important to see the political, economic, social and cultural contexts in which the movement occurs. For that reason, we must also observe the impacts of skilled migration within the wider migration and development debate, which is determined by uneven developments of current social transformations.

### **The Case of India**

India is a case in point for showing how the academic research and policy discussions regarding emigration of skilled professionals have evolved over time. With 16 million people from India living outside their country in 2015, India has the largest diaspora in the world (UNDESA, 2016). Considering such historically high numbers, it would be expected that India has a well-developed diaspora policy. However, for a long time the Indian government paid little attention to its nationals abroad. During a prolonged period of 'conscious de-linking' (Sinha-Kerkhoff and Bal, 2003), which prevailed from independence until the 1990s, the official position was that emigrants were harmful to the country's interests (Castles, 2008). Also with respect to skilled emigration, Kapur assesses that "there has rarely been a nation that has been as blasé about losing its best and brightest as has been India" (Kapur, 2003, p. 7).

The main phases in diaspora policy were termed after the ideologies of different political periods: first, what may be termed the 'Gandhian approach'; second, the 'Nehruvian approach' and, last, the 'Vajpayeean' approach (Sinha-Kerkhoff and Bal, 2003). With the rise of Indian nationalism in the 1920s, the Indian government started to see the well-being of Indians abroad as the government's responsibility. During the struggle for independence, overseas Indians played an important role. Mohandas Gandhi, practicing as a lawyer in South Africa, was among those to frame the fight against the indentured system within the fight against British imperialism. Protection abroad was linked with calls for further integration into host societies and discouragement of return of former indentured workers (Raj, 2015). Officials thought it is better for emigrants to stay abroad since those who returned were 'unsettled by the easier life they lead in the colonies' and were 'generally unable to settle down again to the harder conditions of life prevailing in their native villages and to use their capital economically' (Sinha-Kerkhoff & Bal, 2003). Referring to early remittances, they criticized the way money was spent quickly, after which people looked for opportunities to leave again. Nehru's policy towards diaspora was that of disengagement. He believed that people should identify with the place in which they are residing and therefore encouraged emigrants to take up citizenship in places of settlement (Hercog & Siegel, 2014). Such disengagement from extraterritorial populations was in line with the historical context of non-alignment (van Dongen, 2017).

Some changes towards re-engagement started in the late 70s with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the Minister of External Affairs. He proclaimed the subject of overseas Indians as „one which is very dear to our hearts”, and that India would “never disown them or fail to appreciate and respect their

essential loyalty to the culture and heritage of the mother country“ (HLCID, 2001). When, with the victory of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1998, he became the Prime Minister, they quickly started with the institutionalization of diaspora policies. Introduction of the PIO card (Persons of Indian Origin) was one of the first steps. Indian economic liberalization and the growing economic and political importance of the diaspora also meant that ethnic networks were starting to be seen as a resource and some now even consider India as a leader in diaspora engagement policies (Vezzoli & Lacroix, 2010). The focus is on creating business and scientific networks, particularly with the diaspora in rich countries of North America and Europe. An example of such practice is the yearly Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention, which honors high-profile diaspora representatives for their exceptional achievements. Further emphasis on networking is also seen through institutions like the virtual platform Global India Network of Knowledge (Global-INK) and Prime Minister’s Global Advisory Council which targets eminent Indians abroad to draw upon their experience and knowledge when they meet twice a year. With the award of prizes, conferences and conventions, India has invested significantly to create communal belonging among expatriate members. Politicians speak of immense pride for the achievements of Indian diaspora and for changing the image of India to the world at large (Singh, 2010). With the growing importance of skilled migration for receiving countries, India also got a negotiating clout for improving positions of expatriate workers by signing social security and labor agreements with a number of receiving countries which are in particular attractive for skilled migrants. However, the focus on the skilled and affluent Indians abroad has come at the expense of descendants of indentured laborers outside developed countries and of the less privileged members of diaspora, overall. The state-led focus on the successful diaspora reflects inequalities that already exist domestically (van Dongen, 2017), which also calls for a warning that ultimately changes have to happen from within. Notwithstanding the benefits of the diaspora, India is still a country with huge inequalities and it would be futile to expect people living abroad to bring such changes.

## 4 Skills within the integration debate

There is a generally held view that high-skilled migration is both wanted and welcome (Triadafilopoulos, 2013). While low skilled migrants are also needed to fill essential jobs, they are not necessarily welcome in terms of access to membership in the political community. On the contrary, highly skilled migrants are considered a “prototype of a socially mobile group” (Nowicka, 2014, p. 171). With their financial, social and cultural capital, they can successfully integrate into receiving communities (Föbker, Imani, Nipper, Otto, & Pfaffenbach, 2016; Glebe, 1997; Weiss, 2005). Conditions for their integration into receiving societies are favorable due to their privileged legal and socio-economic positions. They have access to social networks at workplace as well as in society at large, which helps them settle in. Their well-paid, high-status jobs also enable them to live in attractive neighbourhoods that meet their demands (Scott, 2006). They concentrate in upscale neighbourhoods in the city or, when with families, in the suburbs (Föbker et al., 2016). In some places, foreigners form “expat enclaves” which are well equipped with international infrastructure, offering specialized kindergartens, schools and associations (Harvey & Beaverstock, 2016; Wang & Lau, 2008; White & Hurdley, 2003). Such infrastructure facilitates easy settling in, since it is designed for people who often move internationally and enables them to start working right away. In addition, relocation support offered by employers further drives expatriate employees to cluster in the same areas.

Such depiction of highly skilled migrants as “accidental tourists” (Mahroum, 2000) and their social and cultural practices as aloof from local life, is mainly due to the research focus on transnational elites, such as executives and managers in multinational corporations (Beaverstock, 2005; Sklair, 2001). Following corporate decisions and led by the dynamics of global capitalism, highly skilled globetrotters are described as having low level of local attachment to the host society. As a matter of fact, they are not identified by any particular country. As argued by Dahinden, mobility becomes an essential part of migrants’ life strategies and their impetus to stay mobile and move frequently can be viewed ‘as a professional asset’ (Dahinden, 2010, p. 56). Their temporary stay and the ease of settling-in do not yield themselves to questions concerning their integration as it is seen as unproblematic.

Nevertheless, highly qualified people lead much more diverse lifestyles than portrayed in these accounts. In our research on skilled mobility towards Switzerland, we moved beyond the „image of free-moving elites“ (Favell, Adrian et al., 2006, p. 8) and in addition to people coming through a company channel include highly qualified people who moved to the country either as family members, students or asylum seekers. In another project focused on skilled Indians in Europe, we also included diverse profiles of PhD students, academic researchers and professionals in industry. Heterogeneity of studied population allows us to see that conditions in which migration takes place to a large extent determine the opportunities and obstacles which highly educated migrants encounter in search of employment and incorporation in host society. The context of the host country clearly matters and it is not uniform for all skilled migrants. In our study among Indians in Switzerland, several elements such as the scientific and educational excellence of Swiss academic and research institutions, the high quality of life, as well as the favorable employment conditions of transnational companies, are shown as part of a framework of reception in the host country, which is seen as being favorable for skilled migrants who are part of the institutional international work environment (Hercog & Tejada, 2013). Those coming with the industry benefit from organizational channels, recruitment and relocation agencies, linked to employers. Such support plays a crucial role in matching them and their spouses with jobs and providing them with resources for organizing other aspects of their daily-life (Groutsis, Van den Broek, & Harvey, 2015). Services are extended to partners and other family members, which is legitimized by the fact that adequate support may reduce the risk of an unexpected departure of the employee due to his or her family’s difficulty to adjust to the new environment (Ravasi, Salamin, & Davoine, 2015). In contrast, for scientists in the academic sector and students, migration is driven by individual motivation and shaped by their personal contacts and networks. Students benefit from the affiliation with educational institutions, but are faced with the lack of institutional support and control associated with residence permits at the end of their studies. They have to rely on networks they made during their studies (Sandoz, 2016). In the Swiss case, non-EU nationals are to a large extent dependent on the willingness and negotiating power of their future employers. Overall, professional part of life is a very important path for skilled migrants to situate themselves in a new setting. Most social contacts and support come from multinational work environments.

Clearly, all others cannot rely on this kind of support. Those arriving as part of family reunion are first and foremost embedded into networks of relationships connected to their and their partner’s personal situation, with little involvement of the state. Finally, highly skilled asylum seekers and refugees live with most limitations and in a specific kind of dependency from policies and government agencies (Sandoz, 2016). Administrative barriers, limited local skills and experiences,

unwillingness of employers to support them, difficulties with having their qualifications recognized as well as trauma associated with the flight are some of the most evident obstacles for this group. The support structures offered to asylum seekers and recognized refugees are rarely adapted to highly-educated people. The UNHCR study (2014), for instance, shows how their interviewees in Switzerland have systematically been oriented into low-paid professional sectors.

Political discourse on the subject of immigration noticeably sets the structures of inclusion and exclusion and influences incorporation of migrants into the social space of host country. Those coming under the protection channel are seen with suspicion and are faced with numerous obligations and constraints in order to discourage abusive behaviours. As in many countries with preferences for skilled workers, Swiss political discourse portrays skilled migrants as ‘those required by the economy and by science’ and the ‘most capable of being integrated’ into the host society (Riaño & Wastl-Walter, 2006). Our observations of the Swiss setting confirm the argument of Iredale (2001) that policies and cultures of inclusion are arising as demand drives the need for professional workers but the image of skilled migrants as needed and easily integrated is defined by migrants’ jobs and their origin. As opposed to other South Asians, Indians obtained an image of highly-educated immigrant group which is necessary for the Swiss economy. They notice a different, more positive, approach towards them once it is clear they are Indian and work in a highly-skilled job. Being sensitive to how they are perceived by mainstream society, they appreciate their positive evaluation which directs the general positive experiences Indians have in Switzerland (Hercog & Tejada, 2013). Still, they mentioned several difficulties for incorporation into the new local setting. They mention language barriers, local people who are reserved and conservative and what they perceive to be a limited cultural offer.

By including a more diverse group in the study on highly-skilled migrants, we put to test the assumption of highly skilled as economically wanted and socially and politically welcome. Not all highly skilled enjoy the frictionless mobility supported by the state, cities, employers and other service providers. Privileged situations of smooth integration in terms of job success and integration into social networks exist predominantly for people working in multinational corporations. Most other migrants belong to the mobile middle class (Favell, Adrian et al., 2006) and face quite ordinary integration problems of insecurities with immigration authorities, finding jobs matching their skills or finding local networks.

## **5 Conclusion, or what is high-skilled migration after all?**

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the position of high-skilled migration within the contemporary migration debate. The desirability of high-skilled workers and proliferation of policies aiming to attract them has been extensively documented elsewhere (Cerna, 2009; Chaloff & Lemaitre, 2009; Kapur, Devesh & McHale, John, 2005; OECD, 2002; Triadafilopoulos, 2013). This article presents the commonly accepted standpoints and then places them in the historical and political context. In the conclusion, we show how current narratives surrounding skilled migration have an effect on our understanding of who and what constitutes this category of migrants. The first part on government approaches shows how nation states proactively engage in competitive immigration regimes to lure the highly skilled. By way of defining the selection criteria for admission, policies of receiving countries contribute to alternative meanings of who the highly skilled are (Parsons et al., 2014). The second part places skills within the migration and

development debate and shows how sending and receiving countries as well as international organizations are embracing the possible benefits from skilled migration. Migrants and migrant networks are counted on for their contributions to invest and work as a bridge to transfer knowledge and skills to their countries of origin. The third part points out the assumed privileged legal and socio-economic position of highly skilled migrants. In this sense, highly skilled migrants are portrayed as those who: a) are economically useful and contribute to economic competitiveness; b) benefit development outcomes in their countries of origin; and c) are easily integrated in labor markets and societies at large.

Because migrants are selected by policy-defined criteria, their value or “immigrant quality” is defined in a particular time and place. In this regard, someone may be considered a highly skilled migrant with preferential access to residence and work permits only when their characteristics fall within the eligibility requirements. Countries respond to economic situations and continuously re-design qualifying criteria for selective admission and through that categorize migrants according to their economic desirability (Findlay & Cranston, 2015). Even though such approaches are described as “selecting by merit” (Shachar, 2016) or “non-discriminatory” (Joppke, 2005), they still produce inequalities in terms of gender, nationality and age (Boucher, 2016; Kofman, 2014; Tannock, 2011). A great majority of migrants coming through such schemes are young males (77 percent in the case of the Dutch knowledge migrants scheme (OECD, 2016)). While such imbalance in admissions is in part determined by global gender inequalities, policy designs further reinforce them. Salary thresholds, as used by the EU Blue Card and national immigration schemes in several European countries, have clear gendered repercussions since women still on average tend to earn less than men. Skills shortage lists, used among others in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, also tend to include male-dominated professions, meaning that “the kind of work women do more often are defined *prima facie* as less skilled” (Kofman & Raghuram, 2005, p. 150). As such, skills are not valued in and of themselves. Despite emphasizing economic rationality of government approaches to select migrants, criteria are also value-laden and can indirectly still exclude women, older individuals and certain nationalities.

The debate on effects of migration on development places a well-established, high-earning migrant at the center of attention. Governments, academics, practitioners and civil society call upon transnationally active migrants to interact with each other in diaspora networks and with their counterparts in the countries of origin (Clemens, 2015). This has the potential of increased investments, knowledge transfer, innovation, capacity building and even more democratic governance (Perez-Armendariz & Crow, 2010). Clearly, normative perspectives influence when migrants’ activities become marked as developmental or conducive to development (Raghuram, 2009). The focus on labor migration within this debate also leaves out the contributions made by people who came as family migrants or due to forced migration (Koppenberg, 2012). Countries of origin target mainly the affluent sections of their diasporas and praise them for their achievements (Kuschminder & Hercog, 2016). The example of India in this paper shows us how the emphasis on the success of Indian diaspora in rich countries comes with neglect for those who migrated as indentured workers and in general for all less privileged members of diaspora. In a similar fashion, destination countries justify their preferential treatment of selected migrants by enabling them to act transnationally, as if other migrants could not benefit from better opportunities and exploit their potential to become agents of development (Koppenberg, 2012). Policy and scholarly discourses in this area further promote the bias towards transnationally active people, who live in rich countries

and are equipped with the right skills to engage in activities like entrepreneurship or innovation (Agunias & Newland, 2007; De Haas, 2010).

The third part of the paper demonstrates how public discourses show highly-skilled migrants as unproblematic and perhaps even wanted members of society. In addition to routine dichotomizing between high-skilled and low-skilled migration in public discourses, research designs also reinforce the perception of the elite status of the former (Favell, Adrian et al., 2006). We show how by extending the definition of skilled migrants beyond those coming through the company channel, we find that integration paths are far from uniform. Individual characteristics, such as proficiency in the majority language, form important elements of social-cultural integration as they can form the basis for social contacts. However, structural conditions of the country context, work environment and other support structures matter for the kind of opportunities migrants can access, as well as for the choices they can make (Groutsis et al., 2015). Also, questions of underemployment and unemployment are equally pertinent to include in any kind of representation of the highly skilled migrants (Fossland, 2013; McHugh, Batalova, & Morawski, 2014).

Drawing on the three parts of this paper, we present high-skilled migration as a necessary part of economic competitiveness (Menz, 2016), as celebrated self-help development “from below” (De Haas, 2010) and as a prototype of social mobility (Nowicka, 2014). As autonomous and economically independent, skilled migrants have privileged treatment and are counted on to boost not only economies of host societies but also those of their countries of origin, without posing any issues with their presence. This paper shows how policy and scholarly approaches towards highly skilled migrants determine who will be included in this privileged position. With this discussion, we aim to expose the not-so-clear-cut distinction between low- and high-skilled migration and to further our understanding of the extent to which changing government priorities and ideologies impact international mobility by providing opportunities to move and stay for some, while erecting barriers for others.



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